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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR KNIGHT'S DISCUSSIONS WITH FRENCH
OFFICIALS ON BENIN

Classified By: Andrew Young, Political Counselor, reason 1.4 (b and d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: New U.S. Ambassador to Benin, James Knight, on October 23 received from French officials a mixed assessment of the current social, political, and economic situation in the country. France hopes that President Yayi can display a more results-oriented leadership style but are concerned that he could become distracted by his 2011 reelection bid. So far, the French believe Benin has been relatively successful in maintaining state/governance influence over the country despite the economic reality of corruption and regional trafficking networks. We believe France is willing to have an open dialogue with the U.S. about Benin, and perhaps improve coordination on political messages and assistance programs. END SUMMARY.

President Boni Yayi Is on a "Permanent Campaign" But Keeps His Word to France

¶2. (C) Remi Marechaux, one of two staff advisors on Africa at the French presidency, met with new U.S. Ambassador to Benin James Knight on October 23. Marechaux said that Benin was not doing well politically or economically but said that President Boni Yayi always kept his word to France on many commitments and promises. Marechaux cited several of Yayi's shortcomings -- his status as a minority president, his failure to build political alliances, his impulsive and erratic style of governing, and his failure to carry out announced programs. That said, Marechaux said that Yayi was not personally corrupt and that he had the education and background to be president. Marechaux noted ruefully that Yayi seemed to be in perpetual campaign mode, "always promising but never delivering."

¶3. (C) With elections looming in 2011, Yayi was already well into campaign mode for those elections. A united opposition could present a serious challenge, Marechaux stated. Marechaux expressed concern that Yayi had begun mentioning "regional" issues in Benin in connection with municipal elections, which was one way of indirectly appealing to ethnic divisions in the country and which was not a positive sign, Marechaux conceded. Yayi often resorted to demagoguery, and Marechaux said he hoped Yayi would keep this tendency in check.

¶4. (C) Having described Yayi's weaknesses, Marechaux said that "despite everything, we like him, in large part because he's reliable." (NOTE: This "reliability" factor seemed to loom large in Marechaux's evaluation of Yayi. END NOTE.) Bilateral relations were good, and Benin was a frequent destination of French leaders and officials. Marechaux said there was no clear evidence of drug trafficking in Benin but the country remained vulnerable because of its proximity to Nigeria and the long tradition in Benin of smuggling of all sorts. Referring to indications that Equatorial Guinea's President Obiang was drawing closer to Yayi, Marechaux said

that the reason was clearly "money."

Balancing Good Governance and a Corruption-based Economy

15. (C) In a later meeting on October 23, Jerome Spinoza, the West Africa analyst at the MOD's Delegation for Strategic Affairs, told Ambassador Knight and Poloff that Benin "seems to be doing O.K." and did not elaborate further in terms of evaluating its current outlook. Instead, Spinoza described Benin as important to France because it is "the Latin Quarter" of Francophone Africa, explaining that the country has long tradition of education and intellectualism, as well as well-established state institutions, along the French model.

16. (C) France, the EU, and Belgium are all looking to support Benin's maritime security structures in response to trafficking networks and illegal fishing, and Spinoza suggested that better coordination with similar U.S. efforts would be helpful. To date, Benin has been able to maintain a balance in playing foreign assistance-driven state control and an economy based on regional corruption networks, but trouble could be on the horizon if drug traffickers and various regional "mafia" become stronger -- perhaps inspiring the rise of a Beninois "strong-man." Spinoza clarified, however, that a military-led coup is unlikely because Benin keeps about one-third of its forces outside the country on peacekeeping missions, and that Benin's military does not have a "Spartan" mentality.

17. (C) COMMENT: Our impression is that France will work to maintain influence with Yayi and in Benin more broadly and

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hope that it can remain a stable and functional example of France's legacy in Africa. However, Spinoza, more so than Marechaux, expressed concern about the threat posed to the country's stability by prevalent corruption and regional trafficking networks. Should these officials have occasion to travel to Benin we would propose that Embassy Cotonou senior staff share their impressions of the situation on the ground. France appears willing to have an open dialogue with the U.S. about Benin, and perhaps improve coordination on political messages and assistance programs. END COMMENT.

18. (U) Ambassador James Knight has cleared this message.
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